Being a Monastic in the West

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The practice of Buddhism is an art. Monks and nuns are artists and the materials which they use as artists are the five aggregates of form, feeling, discrimination, mental formations, and consciousness. The art is to bring harmony and peace into your five aggregates so that you can offer happiness to others. Truth, beauty, and goodness are found in art. Good monastics are beautiful, which means that they embody goodness and truthfulness. They are successful in the practice due to their mindfulness. Mindfulness leads to insight, understanding, compassion, and love. We practice mindfulness to increase our concentration, which leads us to look deeply. Then love arises in a natural way, and you are able to understand, accept, and be compassionate. The best thing a monastic can do is offer his or her understanding and love.

The *gatha* that a monastic recites before receiving the upper robe in the novice ordination is: "How wondrous is the robe of a monastic! It is the field of all merit. I bow my head to receive it today and vow to wear it life after life." You want to wear the robe of a nun or monk life after life because you have been happy as a monastic.

Happiness is the absence of ill-being. Happiness does not consist of obtaining something outside ourselves. By transforming ill-being, happiness arises and blooms. When we practice mindfulness, we allow happiness to spring up like sweet water from the earth. Usually we look for happiness by ignoring the ill-being in us. We are not at ease with our ill-being and cover it up by using our six senses and their objects to satisfy our cravings. Eyes seek form, ears seek sound, nose seeks smells, tongue seeks tastes, and we seek body contact in sexual activity to forget our suffering. We think that sensual pleasures can help us and make us happy. We seek forgetfulness of our suffering. For example, we eat without being hungry and we can't stop. True joy contains peace and harmony, while fake joy is a fever. Indulging in the five sensual desires of money and material possessions, fame, sex, food, and sleep is a fever. Eventually no sensual desire can cover up our suffering. It just waters the seeds of further suffering. Mindfulness practice is a way to transform ill-being and suffering.

Monks and nuns do not seek happiness outside of themselves. They embrace their ill-being and transform it. They want to practice full time and to live in a temple or practice center with the sangha. Their beginner's mind brings harmony and peace to themselves and others, and it must be nourished each day. Bodhicitta is the mind of enlightenment, awakening, understanding, and love. With it you practice for everyone. You want to nourish your mind of understanding, and you want to alleviate suffering. This is the mind of a bodhisattva. You devote your whole life to this practice.

Precepts are a manifestation of a mindful life. You keep the precepts from a mind of understanding and love. You understand that if you break the precepts, you will cause harm and suffering. The vow to keep the precepts is willingly accepted and is not imposed. A monastic with happiness, love, compassion and understanding can do a lot for the world. A happy person can be of great benefit to the world. Therefore, we must practice the precepts conscientiously.

Is it possible to produce a happy Buddhist monastic in the West? How can we practice so that we are harmonious with the culture in the West, and do not suffer from the negative aspects of that culture? How can we place a Buddhist monastic in society so that he or she can radiate peace and happiness? It is possible. There is a 2,500 year history of the Buddhist Order in Asia. Some of the Asian practices can be relevant for us. We must see what we learn from them as well as from the experiences of Catholic nuns in Western countries.

When you first become a monastic, a time may come when you are embarrassed because lay people show respect to you. When you wear the robe of a monastic, you are a symbol of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. When people show respect to you, you must practice mindful breathing and remember that people are showing respect to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha through your robe, not to you as an

individual. If you become arrogant, you will ruin your life as a nun or monk.

It is important to wear your robes, to be reminded that you are a monastic. Many people want to see the monastic robes. The seed of devotion is still alive. When someone shows respect to a monastic, the monastic should do his or her best to help the person by sitting peacefully and breathing in and out. A monastic should know how to breathe in and establish peace and stability in him or herself, and to breathe in and feel joy and stability. Peace, concentration, joy and stability are possible with one in-breath and one out-breath. The layperson receives peace, stability, and faith by touching the Three Jewels through the monastic. You must do your best to practice at that time. Be a mindful monastic at that moment. In the *Sutra on Happiness*, the Buddha said that to have the opportunity for regular contact with monks and nuns is the greatest happiness.

Laypeople and monastics should help each other to practice. The practice of laypeople has an impact on ordained people. Ordained people are like big brothers and sisters to laypeople and offer great comfort to laypeople. The Buddhist community is composed of monks, nuns, laywomen, and laymen. We need all four sections of the community to be present, including children.